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The Freethinkers' Zetetic Society: An Edinburgh Radical Underworld in the 1820s*

Gordon Pentland

I am persuaded that if people of our opinions would form themselves into societies of the same kind throughout the country, it would be a proper means of uniting them, and be attended with the more happy results; as both women and children might attend as well as men.¹

The writer of the above letter, James Affleck, an Edinburgh grocer, is not well known. Its recipient, Richard Carlile, is more familiar to students of the nineteenth century. Carlile, a Devonian tinsmith turned radical publisher has occupied a central role in narratives of the struggles for a free press and the emergence of modern atheism. As a combative and resourceful publisher, as a freethinker and (possibly) atheist, or as a pioneer of free love and vegetarianism Carlile has been awarded an heroic posthumous reputation. Such veneration began shortly after his death in 1843, when a subsequent generation of freethinkers afforded him a key place in their accounts of the struggle for freedom.² His reputation extended into the twentieth century with, for example, biographies from the Fabian socialist G. D. H. Cole and the Glasgow-based anarchist and freethinker Guy Aldred and a central role in William Wickwar's influential account of the development of a free press.³ From its inception, however, this Carlile-centred mythology made space for other campaigners, mainly functioning as auxiliaries to his own heroic efforts. In particular, Carlile's wife and his sister together with the legion of shopmen and shopwomen who sustained his campaign in the early 1820s and stoically endured prison sentences for publishing and vending libels have featured.

Important parts of this portrait of the early infidel movement remain intact. In particular, the insights that celebrated national cases, such as Carlile's, acted as lightning rods for and generators of wider movements and that the press and networks of booksellers acted as the glue of a dispersed movement, remain important.⁴ While there now exists a rich historiography of infidel subcultures within nineteenth-century Britain, this overwhelmingly focuses on national campaigns and omits textured local

* I would like to thank Malcolm Chase and Paul Pickering for commenting on earlier versions of this

studies. The best and most detailed account of the movement in support of Carlile remains Iain McCalman's unpublished masters thesis, which offers a powerful analysis of the personnel, ideology and practice of early nineteenth-century infidelism as a whole.⁵ It has recently been supplemented by Michael Bush's careful reconstruction of Carlile's following.⁶ Edward Royle's trailblazing work took in a more extensive chronology and was sensitive to local conditions in which infidel subcultures flourished, yet remained focused on their connections to national issues and movements in accounting for a wider secularist movement.⁷

In all of these works, the Edinburgh zetetics have rated at least a passing mention. In Bush's account they are given some sustained attention, principally on the basis of their frequent and sustained contributions to Carlile's newspaper, the *Republican*.⁸ James Epstein's work, however, went further in acknowledging and examining the more substantial contribution made by the Edinburgh freethinkers (who, after all, came up with the particular associational mode of and name for the 'zetetic societies' at the end of 1821). Epstein's detailed and fascinating treatment of their efforts to establish 'a democratic and utopian vision of communicative conditions' used much evidence gleaned from the Edinburgh zetetics. His focus, however, was really to draw conclusions about zetetic culture as a whole and to test further Gwyn Williams earlier question about the intellectual and cultural content of the movement: how successfully had it been 'the first to break out of the populist historical prison of the Norman Yoke'?⁹

The purpose of this article is different. While Affleck has played a bit part as one of what the *Investigator* called the 'martyrs of secularism' and the Edinburgh freethinkers have featured in histories of infidelism, the article certainly does not provide an 'heroic' account of the individual or the organisation.¹⁰ Rather, the aim is to move the lens away from infidelism as either a metropolitan or a national phenomenon to provide a focused local case study. In exploring how men and women came to be and what they did as infidels in one local context it is thus partly aimed at David Nash's prescription for the historical understanding of blasphemy, that it be allowed 'to live for historians actually in the society which created it'.¹¹ It thus aims at providing for a small group the kind of detailed examination afforded to a single blasphemer during an earlier, no less troubled, period of Edinburgh's history.¹²

Inadequate attention has been paid to the ways in which infidel societies emerged and had their existence shaped by local conditions and conflicts. While organised infidelism in Edinburgh was in one sense simply ‘the extension of the Carlile agitation north of the Border’ it was also more than that.¹³ Edinburgh’s freethinkers were not just provincial echoes of metropolitan developments and themselves shaped the outlook, activities and organisation of the wider national movement. More importantly, they constituted a particular urban subculture, one with its own codes of conduct and its own battles to fight. McCalman’s study of London’s multi-layered and richly-documented ‘radical underworld’ and how its various currents navigated and sometimes outlived the turn to ‘respectability’ in the 1820s has justly achieved canonical status within historical studies.¹⁴ There is scope too, however, to examine smaller underworlds, though the challenges of doing so for small groups outside of the metropolis should not be underestimated.

The Edinburgh community is, however, an especially promising case study with which to attempt this. As frequent and vocal correspondents in the pages of Carlile’s *Republican*, historians can access accounts of their activities and edited texts of their lectures. This study, however, moves beyond the admittedly rich insights that can be gleaned from the pages of the *Republican*. The Edinburgh zetetics were also subject to the scrutiny of those in authority and to ongoing legal harassment. Forensic records, including two sets of precognitions (preliminary examinations of witnesses under Scots law) of members of the society allow the historian to look at the movement from ‘the ground up’ rather than refracted through Carlile’s national publication.¹⁵

First, the article examines the local context for infidel culture in Edinburgh and the ways in which organised infidelism emerged from an acute crisis within political life and from a local culture of evangelical activism on the part of Scotland’s Presbyterian churches. Second, it examines the specific origins of the Edinburgh freethinkers’ zetetic Society and the nature of its membership and explores what the Edinburgh zetetics did, by examining the conduct of their meetings, their lectures, their dinners, their library and other activities. Finally, it explores the zetetics’ relationship with the legal and police authorities in Edinburgh.

There are good reasons that Edinburgh provided a hospitable climate for infidel movements in the nineteenth century. The first is that it remained the ecclesiastical centre of Scotland. Both the established church and various secession churches were headquartered in Edinburgh. This guaranteed the perennial presence of large numbers of clergymen, provided annual ritualised events such as May's General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and ensured that controversies and great national ecclesiastical dramas were played out in the capital. Second, Edinburgh was and had long been the most dynamic publishing and bookselling centre in Scotland, whose publishers sustained both national and local controversies.¹⁶

This local context is important in explaining the 'high points' of infidel campaigns. The most famous of Scotland's ecclesiastical dramas – the Disruption in 1843 – later provided a very pointed context for infidel campaigns under the auspices of the Anti-Persecution Union.¹⁷ For the earlier period and the emergence of an organised infidel movement in Edinburgh, the context is no less informative. Those pressures which underlay the Disruption and the ten years' conflict that preceded it were all present from 1815.¹⁸ The increasingly vexed relationship between the national church and dissent in the form of the secession churches (representing, by the 1820s over one third of Edinburgh's population) ensured that theological and ecclesiastical controversies were omnipresent.¹⁹ Breakneck urbanisation threw up challenges for a territorial national church and so concerns with crime, poverty, urban infidelity and the need for church extension shaped public debate. The continuing efforts to resocialise soldiers returning from the Napoleonic Wars, the growing spectre of pauperism and the challenges of demographic growth all contributed to a context in which activist and missionary evangelicalism was at the forefront of efforts at reform.²⁰

While the intellectual response to these challenges encompassed new ideas around social enquiry and social reform as well as the prescriptions of Whig ideologues and political radicals, there was also a concentration on refurbishing revealed Christianity the better to sustain it against the assault of urban infidelity. One of the ways in which this was most successfully done – or at least most popularly

done – combined an evangelical commitment to activism with powerful analysis and an openness to engage with new scientific developments. One organ of this changed evangelical outlook was the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, which would later attract the ire of the Edinburgh zetetics. An evangelical contender with the ‘secular’ monthlies the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, it combined religious content with reviews of literary and scientific work.²¹

The best individual illustration of this outlook was Thomas Chalmers. His *Evidence and Authority of the Christian Revelation* (a single-volume version of an article for Brewster’s *Edinburgh Encyclopedia*) had run through six editions by 1820 and was an evangelical addition to classic defences of revealed Christianity and was later damned by Carlile as ‘deeply tinctured with the pen of the hireling’.²² His nationwide celebrity was confirmed by the delivery of series of lectures at the Tron Church in Glasgow and their publication as the *Astronomical Discourses*.²³ This latter work, an absolute bestseller (it sold 6000 copies in 10 weeks and 20,000 within a year) which essayed the reconciliation of scriptural Christianity and astronomical science, was aimed explicitly at ‘stripping Infidelity of those pretensions to enlargement, and to a certain air of philosophical greatness, by which it has often been so destructively alluring to the young, and the ardent, and the ambitious’.²⁴

The infidels of the early nineteenth century were directly competing with (and indeed, borrowing from) this insurgent evangelical activism. Those places where the evangelical presence was strong, in terms of personnel, institutions and publications, were likely to provide hospitable seed-beds for infidel movements. Evangelicalism and infidelism are best seen (like ‘radicalism’ and ‘loyalism’ in the 1790s) in a dynamic relationship with one another. The strength of local evangelical efforts helps to explain not only the totalizing and combatant tone of some infidels, but also the presence of a much more hesitant and qualified withdrawal from the form and content of Trinitarian orthodoxies among some zetetics.²⁵ Indeed, Christian commentators frequently noted the coincidence of evangelical and infidel strength, but refused to draw and links between the two:

It is a melancholy fact, that while the friends of Christianity in every quarter of the world ... are manifesting an uncommon ardour in disseminating the principles, and promoting the practice of

true religion, its enemies are no less industrious in setting up a powerful principle of counteraction to these exertions.²⁶

In terms of its social structure and, indeed, its physical environment, Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century mapped very neatly onto the sorts of social constituency that both contemporaries and historians identified as nurseries of various forms of political and religious heterodoxy in Europe. As well as its large body of professionals (especially clergymen, lawyers and doctors) Edinburgh had a comparatively high proportion of artisans and skilled craftsmen, a large number of retailers, and a substantial and growing publishing and printing industry.²⁷ It also boasted high levels of general education and literacy. Taken together, these social features certainly help to explain the emergence of an infidel movement with an ethic of self-improvement. Given its occupational profile, Edinburgh was also well placed to act as a lightning rod for some of the concerns which underpinned the growing obsession with 'moral reform'. In particular, it was a city well placed to focus minds on the implications of a growing consumer society and uneasiness about that rapidly proliferating industry which 'aroused anxiety about consumer frailty more widely than any other', the publishing industry.²⁸

While Edinburgh's new town and city improvements had opened up spacious and elegant new neighbourhoods from the late eighteenth century, the old town retained the 'jostle and huddlement' that had characterised the city from the early modern period.²⁹ Parts of it had quite literally been constituted as an 'underworld', when the South Bridge, linking Edinburgh's High Street to the university on the south side, was completed in the 1780s.³⁰ The characteristic tenement housing and narrow 'wynds' remained the typical housing for artisans, craftsmen and modest retailers well into the nineteenth century and the Old Town formed the recruiting ground for the infidel society.

None of this is to suggest any determinism around the emergence of a strong infidel movement in the city. The local contexts sketched above, however, do help to explain aspects of the movement's emergence. As will be demonstrated below, Edinburgh's distinctive intellectual life and Scotland's separate legal framework are equally important in interpreting the official response to the zetetics.

The freethinkers' or zetetic society was formed during the spring of 1820 'for the purpose of discussing literary, philosophical, and theological subjects' and 'reading philosophical books'.³¹ Its immediate stimulus had been the meeting of several like-minded acquaintances from Edinburgh's Old Town, some time after November 1819, to subscribe to a fund towards the payment of Richard Carlile's £1500 fines, part of his sentence for multiple counts of blasphemous libel.³² Carlile's combative and pugnacious style and his efforts to provoke and confront the agencies of prosecution (both the legal trappings of the state and moral crusading bodies such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice) was attractive to small groups, some new and others based on pre-existing clubs and organisations, in many towns, which eventually coalesced into a loose and widely dispersed infidel 'movement'.³³

The origins of the zetetic society in Edinburgh were thus firmly within that prolonged period of political crisis running from the Peterloo massacre of August 1819 and its attendant raft of restrictive legislation in the winter through to the resolution of the Queen Caroline crisis in 1821. The importance of the year of the society's foundation as 'a year of political dislocation unparalleled in peace time' has recently been eloquently articulated by Malcolm Chase.³⁴ Attempted insurrections and assassinations across the United Kingdom were played out on the canvas of a withering economic recession and considerable revolutionary instability on the European continent. This crisis year had a distinctive Scottish face in the abortive efforts at a general insurrection in April 1820, which had seen a large number of troops deployed to police the western lowlands of Scotland and had created a pervasive sense of insecurity.³⁵

The period taking in 1819 and 1820 has always acted as something of a 'pivot' within chronologies of British radicalism. The end of mass platform radicalism spawned the 'strangely quiet' 1820s, during which the lower orders retooled with a range of alternative ideologies which would underpin later working-class politics as well as exploring opportunities to remap constitutional politics.³⁶ The last of these, pursued through the broad cross-class alliance underpinning the support for Queen Caroline, was not sustained thereafter. Local Whigs in Edinburgh had come under fire for their efforts '*ad captandum vulgus*' and were especially pilloried in the loyalist press for courting 'the *elite* of the Cowgate'.³⁷ Carlile's approach – the pursuit of an ideologically pure republicanism based on the revival

and canonisation of Thomas Paine – stood in contrast to the expansive populism of the Queen Caroline agitation and represented another alternative for the reworking and refurbishment of radicalism after 1820.

In the Edinburgh context it is possible to see the efforts of the small group of men who established the society as one response to a particularly fraught moment. Its core constituency in Edinburgh lay among those sections of the populace which Alexander Boswell (with reference to Ayrshire) had identified as reluctantly loyal during the tumults of the crisis of 1819-20:

It is however gratifying that in general all those one degree above this position, master workmen, petty shopkeepers, and all who have a little property or reasonable hope of bettering their condition, seem to be loyal: lukewarm indeed too often, and yielding to intimidation, but not friendly to the insane schemes of these Constitution makers & menders, and willing to live contended under circumstances, although suffering from the general stagnation of trade.³⁸

The zetetics were drawn from the same part of society. In looking at the prominent figures within the society – those who contributed the most in terms of money, time, publications, and lecturing – we are firmly in what used to be called *petit-bourgeois* territory. The five men who subscribed the first ten pounds towards Carlile's fines – the brothers James and Robert Affleck, William Hay, David Leitch and John McNiven – were all men of small capital and retailers. The Afflecks and Leitch were grocers and spirit dealers, Hay a victual dealer, and McNiven ran a paper warehouse.³⁹ In other respects the Edinburgh membership seems to map directly onto the first two categories of McCalman's initial tripartite identification: artisans and skilled labourers; small-to-moderate men of small capital and modest property; and 'sub-professionals'.⁴⁰ Identifiable individuals from subsequent subscription lists reveal retailers as the single most prominent group both in terms of numbers and contributions (written, spoken, and financial) joined by craftsmen and artisans of various descriptions.⁴¹

The level of subscriptions, the tone and content of meetings, and the occupations of subscribers ensure that it is extremely difficult to describe the zetetics as a 'working-class' body in any useful way and gives the lie to those hostile reports that sought to damn the society as comprising 'the lowest

description of persons'.⁴² Zetetics' writings and lectures certainly identified and vilified the corrupt and idle non-producers – kings, priests and clerics – and contrasted them with 'industrious men' and they most frequently identified commerce as the occupation suited to the exercise of virtue in society.⁴³ There is little reason to doubt the fundamentals of their self-description as a group of businessmen and artisans gathered for the purpose of discussion and self-improvement.

The composition of the society also reveals the bonds of community. All of the original subscribers worked close to one another within Edinburgh's Old Town (the Afflecks in the Grassmarket, Leitch and Hay on the Cowgate and McNiven just off it on Blair Street). Women were absent from early subscription lists, which instead offer the impression of a very masculine form of collective action. In common with other zetetic societies and stimulated in part by the successive prosecutions and imprisonments of Jane and Mary-Anne Carlile and Susannah Wright across 1821 and 1822, however, female subscribers became ever more prominent.⁴⁴ As with Carlile himself, the women subscribers were most often family members, the wives, sisters and daughters of male zetetics, whose participation embodied an idealised republican domestic sphere.⁴⁵

Overall, the social composition and origins of the Edinburgh zetetics suggest a movement of aspiration rather than one of desperation. Within the context of what was, following 1820, a generally benign and even relatively prosperous economic context, they drew their most active support in Edinburgh from that liminal section of the community uncomfortably poised between prosperity and potential pauperism: in many ways the real 'elite of the Cowgate'. The Afflecks themselves were a case in point. From a single shop at 49 Grassmarket, they were in the process of expanding their grocery business, first with the addition of a shop on the Pleasance in Edinburgh's developing southern suburbs, then with the opening of premises in the well-heeled New Town on Howe Street. Zetetics were certainly focused on 'bettering their condition', though not in the way that Boswell had imagined.

The activities of the zetetics aligned with this social profile. In their public statements and those they made to the legal authorities, zetetics presented themselves as an inoffensive group of self-improvers, little interested in disturbing the public peace and 'formed for the purpose of discussing Philosophical subjects and reading Philosophical books'.⁴⁶ In their petition to parliament after their meeting had been invaded by the Edinburgh sheriff, they spoke explicitly in a language of moral reform, articulating aims that would have been familiar to advocates of Sabbath schools or mechanics' institutes:

That the principal object which your petitioners had in view by their meeting as a society was, by their unanimous and expressed opinion, to encourage virtue and suppress vice among their members, and to keep Free-thinkers who did not go to church, from spending Sundays in drinking and dissipation, to which, on that day, they might be seduced by idle company.⁴⁷

Naturally, we need to read these accounts very critically, taking account of the tactical imperatives involved in petitioning or offering a witness statement. Nonetheless, in meeting on Sunday afternoons at 2pm the zetetics were making a conscious effort to provide a 'rational' alternative to church or Sunday School attendance.⁴⁸ Its members, indeed, discussed it in such a way, the young apprentice Alexander Milne, for example, inviting friends 'to his church'.⁴⁹

It proved a qualified success. Two or three weeks following its formation the zetetic society needed larger premises and so moved to the cordiners' hall, which had relocated to Potterrow on the sale and demolition of the old hall in 1820. The cordiners' hall had frequently been leased for religious purposes in the recent past, hosting an 'English' Baptist (as opposed to the more Calvinistic 'Scotch' Baptists) congregation. The hall continued to serve this purpose briefly at its new Potterrow site, before being occupied on the sabbath by the zetetics, something which meant occasional calls from strangers, presumably looking for the Baptist congregation, but who decided to remain for the zetetics' discussion.⁵⁰ About a year after formation, the zetetics progressed from bringing friends and acquaintances to throwing open their doors completely and achieved audiences of between three and four hundred, with women and children in attendance.⁵¹ The development of the zetetics occurred at a time of heightened evangelical effort in terms of church-building and Sunday school provision. for which

some of the rhetorical justification was the growth in infidelity. In entering this market and acting as a rational 'church', the Edinburgh zetetics not only prefigured the later transformation of organised infidelity into a more formal 'religion', but also sponsored a more nuanced engagement with Christian doctrines – of a kind that might have persuaded displaced Baptists to stay and listen – than their enemies gave them credit for.⁵²

The summation of one of James Affleck's contributions, a lecture to the zetetics 'On the Absurdity of Public Worship', which was later published in the *Republican*, can stand as a sort of manifesto for the society:

Let us despise such superstitious absurdities, and assemble ourselves together as rational men, for mutual instruction.

I hail with pleasure, the plans and principles of this young society; it appears to me like the rising sun verging above the horizon, dispelling the misty clouds of darkness and superstition that have so long enveloped the world. I hope there is nothing extravagant in anticipating this society as the cradle of men, who at no very distant day will assist in renovating insulted and degraded mankind. Allow me to exhort all of you to be anxious in promoting its interest and prosperity; and let every member, if possible, come forward with his discourse however lame it may appear to be; as we intend to proceed by calm inquiry to search after truth; and should wish to be informed, where and how we may be mistaken in our opinions, have our errors, if any, pointed out by each other, or any one, and from this mode of proceeding we may expect the most happy results.⁵³

Men like the Afflecks, the driving forces behind the society, were clearly convinced deists and, possibly, atheists. They exemplified the kind of millennialist faith in rational progress and scientific inquiry which McCalman and Epstein have identified as the hallmark of zetetic ideology and culture.⁵⁴

The mode of proceeding – one member read a lecture or essay and then vacated the chair to allow for free discussion – may have aimed at producing 'a democratic and utopian vision of communicative conditions'. though only following the society through the pages of the republican

would suggest two or three dominant voices, with the Afflecks at the forefront.⁵⁵ At the other end of the spectrum from the Afflecks we have men, like the apprentice shoemaker George McLatchie, who attended simply 'to see what was going on' and to access the zetetics' library or the potter John Moses who attended 'from curiosity' and kept returning despite or because of the 'great absurdities' spoken by the Afflecks.⁵⁶

The zetetic society was not simply a platform for infidel views. Tags such as 'A liberal Christian' even simply 'a Christian' were common on the Edinburgh subscription lists and a number of witnesses attested to the diversity of beliefs represented at meetings.⁵⁷ James Thorburn, a mason and grocer, emerged particularly as an individual who attended with a view to questioning critically both his own committed Christian beliefs and those many members who were 'not only Deists but Atheists'. Indeed, Thorburn and a shoemaker named Wallace did much to realise the democratic conditions of debate by securing the rights of 'strangers' rather than just members to be heard and by seeking to extend the right of reply to the lecture to more than ten minutes. Thorburn, for example, was permitted 'to speak for half an hour in defence of the Character of Jesus Christ'.⁵⁸ Indeed, the claims to cool, rational and quiet debate made in the zetetics' public statements clearly misrepresented a much more heated and disputatious reality.

Pooling their capital the zetetics managed to purchase a small library, which also indicates some of the diversity of zetetic interests. From press reports, precognitions and the zetetics' own petition against the interruption of their meeting it is possible to reconstruct the content of some of this library.⁵⁹ Some caution is, however, required. Newspapers only reported those items likely to underline their hostile reporting of the society and sheriff's officers confiscated and focused their questioning around those titles thought likely to furnish the basis of prosecutions.

Nevertheless, with those caveats it is possible to get some sense of the shape of the zetetics' library. It encompassed, of course, Carlile's edition of the *Theological Works of Thomas Paine* (1818), copies of the *Republican* and other works composed by Carlile (including editions of the trials of Carlile and his wife) and Thomas Clio Rickman's *Life of Paine* (1819). These were joined by two works which were core freethinking texts by the 1820s: Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770). which McCalman

described as ‘the sourcebook of the new Zetetic philosophy’ and which had circulated among metropolitan radicals in translation in the 1790s; and Percy Shelley’s *Queen Mab; A Philosophical Poem, with Notes* (1813).⁶⁰ This latter was supplemented by other romantic works, including Byron’s controversial closet play *Cain: A Mystery* (1821), of which Carille published a cheap edition in 1822, and copies of Leigh Hunt’s short-lived *Liberal* (1822-3).⁶¹

The Edinburgh library also encompassed other titles from both the French and Scottish enlightenments. Bernardin de St Pierre’s *Studies of Nature* (1785) and Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) sat alongside Lord Kames’ *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774) and an edition of David Hume’s *Essays*. The interest in scientific approaches to knowledge, which had received its clarion call in Carlile’s *Address to Men of Science* (1821), is clear from the language of the Edinburgh zetetics and by their intention to purchase a pair of orreries.⁶² If this scientific bent had its sourcebook in d’Holbach, the Edinburgh zetetics were also reading other indigenous sources to inform their views of the universe. The shoemaker McLatchie, for example, had borrowed Oliver Goldsmith’s *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774) from the zetetic library, which also contained a copy of a rare geological work, by the Edinburgh-trained George Hoggart Toulmin, *The Eternity of the Universe* (1789). This latter had been first published in 1789, but would not be reissued until Carile’s own edition of 1825 and provided ‘an alternative cosmology with which to confront the established Church and the church scientific’.⁶³

The engagement with sceptical works of the Scottish enlightenment also indicates a particular local dimension to the zetetics, who wrote to Joseph Hume in support of their petition, that such infidel societies had been sustained, undisturbed in Scotland, ‘since the days of Mr Hume’.⁶⁴ This connection with a local ‘infidel’ past was made much of by Carlile and the Edinburgh zetetics themselves:

Vile and odious hypocrites (whether Whig or Tory) do they not know that, almost to a man, the Colleges of Physicians, of Surgeons, and of Advocates in Scotland, are composed of men of Carlile’s principles; which were the principles, before Carlile was born, of Burns, of Adam Smith, of David Hume, of Lord Kaimes, and we may go back to every name that is honourable to the Scottish nation, and find that they were persons of Carlile’s principles.⁶⁵

It was one means of chastising those in authority and accusing them of hypocrisy, but it was also a powerful way of making claims to respectability and attempting to bridge the divide between learned, expensively bound blasphemy and the zetetics' more workmanlike efforts.⁶⁶

Other streams of radical thought were apparent as well. The library contained John Wade's *The Black Book; or, Corruption Unmasked!* (1820), a wildly popular catalogue of corruption as well as Robert Owen's *New View of Society, or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character* (1813-14). The proximity of Owenite and zetetic thinking – both based on a radical materialism, on similar enlightenment sources, and speaking in similar millenarian languages – has been remarked on by McCalman and Royle indicated that the two traditions overlapped and converged in the 1830s.⁶⁷ In the Edinburgh context such links were substantiated too by the acquaintance of Affleck with Abram Combe (brother of the more famous phrenologist George) an early supporter and populariser of Owen's works and organiser of the Owenite community at Orbiston near Motherwell.⁶⁸ Carlile commented approvingly on Combe's works, as well as Owen's, and zetetics were clearly engaging with Owen's ideas as well as Carlile's.⁶⁹ Robert Affleck, for example, argued at a meeting 'that Mr Owen had established a system of far more utility and advantage to mankind than that of Jesus Christ'.⁷⁰

Finally, we should note that the zetetics' claim to be supporting free discussion rather than evangelising on the basis of 'infidel' positions receives some support from their library. Alongside the works by Paine and Carlile, they held some of the most eloquent defences of revealed Christianity. These included two which explicitly aimed at Paine's *Age of Reason*: Richard Watson's *Apology for Christianity* (1796) and the American Uzal Ogden's *Antidote to Deism: The Deist Unmasked* (1795).⁷¹ Even if these were purchased on the basis of 'know thy enemy', along with the content of some of the works written by Edinburgh zetetics, they do indicate a disposition to inquire into and understand Christianity's best defences, rather than simply to bulldoze them.

This diverse movement in Edinburgh helped to shape infidelism nationally. James Affleck's correspondence with Richard Carlile had begun shortly after the latter's trial and Epstein has identified important original contributions coming from this provincial society.⁷² The first was to provide a blueprint for conducting similar groups of freethinkers and a name for such groups. 'zetetics'. which was

enthusiastically endorsed by Carlile.⁷³ Where the inspiration for the name might have originated is unclear. The word itself was exotic but not entirely unfamiliar and it was a regular fixture in dictionaries and encyclopedias.⁷⁴ The attraction for Affleck and for Carlile was the associations of the word with scientific and rational inquiry. Second was the suggestion that Carlile refer to Great Britain as Albion, a practice which Carlile subsequently followed in 1823 in the interests of purifying his language of associations with monarchy and historical conquest.⁷⁵

If the *Republican* was important glue for such a loosely structured and widely dispersed movement, it was also a crucial vehicle for the self-improving aspirations of Edinburgh zetetics. Quite apart from their contributions in terms of a few original ideas for the wider movement and subscriptions for the fines of Carlile and others, the Edinburgh zetetics generated a large amount of copy. In some cases, the movement thus allowed shopkeepers to become authors. The Afflecks' Edinburgh lectures took up large expanses of the *Republican* for 1823.⁷⁶ Robert Affleck's lectures highlighting inconsistencies within the new testament – a classic and far-from-original mode of infidel reasoning – was published in a standalone volume by Carlile and puffed in the *Republican*.⁷⁷ As Edinburgh agent for Carlile, James Affleck ultimately set up a small bookselling business and began publishing infidel tracts on his own account. On a more modest scale, the authors of occasional acrostics, poems and songs or letters embodying their own ideas found a ready space in the *Republican*.⁷⁸

IV

The Edinburgh zetetics were not, however, or at least not only, a quiet self-improving discussion group. If they had been, it is likely that they would not have come to the attention of the legal authorities in Edinburgh or not in such a way as to warrant intervention. First, there was a public and confrontational dimension to their activities, which became more pronounced. Secondly, alongside the Afflecks commitment to democratic and transparent communication was clear evidence that, like the 'Jacobins' of the 1790s, the 'zetetics' of the 1820s had not and did not wish to retreat fully from 'the broader theatricality of Georgian political culture'.⁷⁹

The Edinburgh zetetics were a very early example of the practice of holding a formal Paine dinner on or around Paine's birthday. These 'took off' in January 1822, both as part of a wider interest sparked by Cobbett's well publicised repatriation of Paine's mortal remains at the end of 1819 and in response to Carlile's long-term rehabilitation of Paine and his works. The latter was accompanied by an exhortation, dated 25 December, to formalise and publicise the celebration of Paine's birthday as a kind of republican counterblast to Christmas celebrations.⁸⁰ Radical dining and toasting were, of course, of long provenance, a sort of convivial politics which could flexibly accommodate itself to changing political conditions.⁸¹

For the Edinburgh zetetics, the 1822 dinner was their second annual celebration of Paine's birthday and the slate of toasts, songs and tunes seems to have been established at a dinner the previous year.⁸² What makes the local context for this innovation so important was the clearly raised political temperature around public and political dining in the January of 1821. Within Edinburgh, both the Whigs and the Tories had well established traditions, which annually celebrated their respective cult figures – Charles James Fox and William Pitt.⁸³ These had frequently been accompanied by political contests and considerable discussion and argument in the press. January 1821 was the 'high point' of this symbolic dining. In the context of a year of bitter party politics around the Queen Caroline issue, the Tories arranged to have their dinner in January (the normal celebration was in May, around Pitt's birthday) so that it was in direct conflict with the Whigs' celebration of Fox.⁸⁴ Both of these established dinners in that year reported around five hundred people sitting down to dinner in sumptuous venues in Edinburgh's New Town (the Assembly Rooms for the Tories, the Waterloo Hotel for the Whigs).⁸⁵ It was clearly no coincidence that a small group of Edinburgh freethinkers decided to begin formal commemoration of Paine's birthday from the following week. Their annual celebrations to at least 1826 were an Old Town counterpoint to the New Town splendour of the Fox and Pitt dinners.

The dinners also demonstrate the syncretism of freethinking culture. Held habitually in taverns, Edinburgh's Paine dinners suggest that the evacuation of the more masculine, rough-and-tumble atmosphere of earlier radicalism was partial and more evident in the public accounts the zetetics gave of their weekly meetings than in the reality of their other activities.⁸⁶ Some zetetics may have chosen to

toast Paine with water as a sign of the purity of their republican principles, but at Edinburgh alcohol at dinner was followed by each man receiving 'a glass and a bottle of toddy'. The run of toasts may have expressed a rational attachment to the republican present, but accompanying tunes, songs and verse ensured a continued blending of 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' radicalism. The toast 'May the Republic of Haiti, be an example to Slaves and Men of Colour all over the World', for example, was accompanied by the bawdy tune 'Black Jock'.⁸⁷ A similar delight in irreverence and bawdy was apparent in what we know of the Edinburgh zetetics' response to the famous visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822.⁸⁸ James Affleck's letters mocked the event and he pointedly sent for publication Sandy Rodger's celebrated satire of Walter Scott's laudatory poem 'Carle, now the King's Come', which had been available for 1d during the visit:

Sawney, now the King's come,
Sawney, now the King's come,
Kneel and kiss his royal bum.⁸⁹

Their increasing vociferousness across 1822 in part explains the decision of the Edinburgh authorities to take action against the Edinburgh zetetics. The crown in Scotland had not been especially zealous in launching cases of blasphemous libel and, since 1808, only three separate prosecutions on the basis of selling blasphemous publications had been pursued and had seen the accused outlawed on failing to appear.⁹⁰ The absence of bodies like the Vice Society and the Constitutional Association, so forward in preparing prosecutions against Carlile and his supporters in England, is an important part of the explanation. The increased activism of the group and its size (by the second half of 1822 the zetetics appear to have been filling the Cordiners' hall with between three and four hundred people) jolted the authorities into action.⁹¹ Rather than acting as the Scottish face of a centralised effort against infidel activities, the response was local one, albeit part of the more widespread sense of moral panic around blasphemy and a licentious press so marked since 1819.

In the Edinburgh context, the most alarming aspect of zetetic activities was their policy of opening the doors of their meetings to women and, especially, children. This had been focused on by

Thomas Birnie, the sheriff's officer who had been sent to the meetings by the sheriff from the end of October onwards. At the meeting on 27 October he had reported Robert Affleck as openly welcoming children to the meetings and this clearly formed an area of concern for the local law officers thereafter.⁹² It provides an example of another way in which zetetics were 'caught between cultural worlds': their efforts to build a kind of republican respectability, based on the models provided by those churches they criticised, made them all the more likely to be attacked.⁹³

Birnie had continued to attend for two more Sunday meetings before, on 17 November, the sheriff and his officers raided the meeting, confined three zetetics (Wilson and the two Afflecks) and searched the premises as well as Robert Affleck's home. They found the society's books in the hall along with two copies of *The Theological Works of Thomas Paine* and a copy of *Queen Mab*.⁹⁴ No charges were brought and the law officers would later remind James Affleck of 'the mildness with which your concern in the Zetetick Society was treated'.⁹⁵ More likely, given that no blasphemous publications had been sold to law agents, the law officers would have run into that full range of obstacles that made the prosecution of speech a 'double-edged' weapon for governments across this period.⁹⁶ It was not, however, without consequences. The detained men had to find substantial securities and the original report on the discovery of this 'nest' of Edinburgh infidels was widely circulated in the press.⁹⁷ James Affleck, for example, who had recently opened a grocery business on Howe Street in the Edinburgh New Town, was badly affected by 'the publication of his name with that stigma in all the Edinburgh newspapers'.⁹⁸ His well-heeled customers deserted him and he returned to business on the south side of the city, as both a grocer and now also a bookseller.

The raid was not, however, without value to the zetetics. It furnished them with a powerful narrative with which to petition parliament and stimulate wider debate.⁹⁹ Suppression and petition almost certainly increased public awareness of the Edinburgh zetetics, both within the wider infidel movement and among the Edinburgh population. One of the toasts at the Leeds Paine dinner in 1823, for example, was to 'the two Afflecks of Edinburgh, and may they establish Free Discussion in Scotland'.¹⁰⁰ The *Scotsman*, a qualified advocate of free discussion, pointed to what was increasingly obvious as the double-edged nature of such prosecutions:

The consequence has been, that what was *unknown*, we shall venture to say, to one hundred and ninety-nine out of every two hundred persons in this city, is now proclaimed, we may assert, not only at our own market-place, but through the whole United Kingdom.¹⁰¹

James Affleck sniffed a commercial opportunity in this exposure as well as a propagandistic one. The closing of his New Town grocery business may well have been forced upon him, but it also allowed him to set himself up as bookseller in Adam's Square, just off the South Bridge (and thus as an insurgent challenger to the large booksellers on the bridge). As a radical entrepreneur, Affleck was attempting to ape those other leaders – Carlile, of course, but also men such as Cobbett, Hunt and Wooler – who entered the 'trade of agitation' in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰² In writing to the *Republican* to inform Carlile of this move, he adopted the bombastic persona of the convinced infidel:

My principal reason for commencing in business as a bookseller was, that I might have a better opportunity of coming into contact with liberal-minded men, and of disseminating such books as, I trust, will ultimately tend to uproot the Christian superstition. This is the only revenge which I wish to achieve for the injury I have received.¹⁰³

In trying to set himself up as the Carlile of Edinburgh, Affleck became much more dynamic and activist as a publisher and propagandist. In doing so he sought to take on prominent citizens, just as Carlile had done in his famous battles, and thus articulate infidelism within the local context. Using the print shop of David Webster, Affleck quickly published, publicised and sold three pamphlets at 4d each. While he did not reveal their authors, he admitted to being heavily involved in their revision and it is quite likely they were collaborative productions by James and his brother Robert.¹⁰⁴ These pamphlets pointedly sought to engage the clerical intelligentsia of Edinburgh and were advertised from Affleck's shop, by means of placards carried around the town and by boards hung on the rails of the South Bridge and the Cowgate Arch.¹⁰⁵

They achieved some popularity. The first pamphlet, addressed to the moderator of the Church of Scotland, made it into a second edition and provoked a response from the *Christian Instructor* and was

then followed by a sequel.¹⁰⁶ The individuals who the Afflecks sought to draw into debate were substantial local figures. The editor of the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, Andrew Thomson, was a celebrated public churchman as evangelical minister of the St George's church at the west end of Princes Street. He had begun to deliver what would become a series of nine sermons on infidelity from the spring of 1819. The frequency of these increased from late 1820, with five written and delivered in December 1820 to January 1821. Thomson and, indeed, other contributors to the *Christian Instructor*, reserved a very special opprobrium for those who consciously sought to convert others to infidelity and so were promising targets to embroil in debate.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps the most explosive production, however, was a text explicitly designed for children. *The Zetetic Society's Shorter Catechism* was expressly aimed at converting the young.¹⁰⁸ When Affleck was later arrested, he was questioned about its authorship as well as sales and whether it had been distributed free of charge.¹⁰⁹ Along with the Bible, the Westminster shorter catechism was the most omnipresent religious text within Scottish Presbyterianism and was critical in the religious instruction of young Scots. The alphabet was very often printed on the back of the catechism simply because it was so frequently used as the medium of instruction for reading.¹¹⁰ The *Shorter Catechism* was thus parody with a purpose. Just as Carlile's campaign moved in the direction of constituting infidelism as a religion so the efforts of Affleck as publisher were to hijack and co-opt successful Christian means of education.

The evangelical critique of infidelity was especially hostile to activist and conversionist activity by infidels, while publishing and selling blasphemous libels was a far more straightforward crime to prosecute than spoken blasphemy or sedition. Affleck fell foul of both of these imperatives. The public and evangelising nature of his activities would make it appear that Affleck was keen to follow Carlile's model to the point of inviting prosecution, trial and imprisonment. When it came, however, he did not welcome it in the manner that Carlile had, as an opportunity to bloody the noses of authority, and his correspondence with the authorities stood in stark contrast to Carlile's unrepentant stance.¹¹¹ Instead, Affleck's retreat from his activities was rapid and total. He petitioned the Lord Advocate, William Rae, appealing to 'that spirit of humanity which you are known to possess' to cease proceedings against him on the plea that these might 'cause the death of his delicate wife. and the ruin of his young family'. He

had already lost all of those books considered blasphemous and had written to London to cease sending the periodicals.¹¹² By the end of March he had promised to give up the bookselling business altogether with the aim of living as 'a moral and inoffensive man'.¹¹³

Affleck's defence, prepared by Francis Jeffrey, followed a similar line: full admission of guilt, testaments of his good character along with the plea of financial necessity as the reason for setting up as a bookseller.¹¹⁴ Even then it apparently shared some features with other blasphemy defences. One of these was the effort to bridge the chasm between what was considered normative within 'polite' and 'street' cultures by citing the catalogues of several 'respectable' booksellers, who had sold titles included in his indictment but had not been prosecuted.¹¹⁵

Carlile, as he had done with previous trials, sought to afford maximum publicity to the trial by publishing the indictment in full along with his own commentaries. By this route, the *Shorter Catechism* was published nearly in full in the *Republican* and a riposte given to the Lord Justice Clerk's request that the press not report the trial.¹¹⁶ Carlile's explanation for Affleck's approach to the trial and Affleck's own later reflections contrast sharply with Affleck's actual conduct. They pressed the idea that the severity of the law in Scotland made it suicidally dangerous to contest a blasphemy charge in the way that Carlile had done at the Guildhall and that Affleck's lawyers had advised him that any effort to engage in a reasoned defence of infidelism would certainly result in transportation and perhaps death.¹¹⁷ This did allow for a wider argument to be made, one which was well based within different strands of Scottish radicalism and whiggery: that the Scottish criminal law was far more savage and arbitrary than the English. Affleck's experience, which ended the activist phase of the Edinburgh zetetics, is also a salient reminder that the heroic defences of Carlile, his relatives and his workers, were only one option open to early nineteenth-century infidels.

V

If it was the end of one activist phase of the small underworld of freethinkers in Edinburgh, it was not the end of the world they had made. Indeed, one of the important consequences of the organisation

and activities explored above was to create a remarkably robust infidel subculture in Edinburgh. The zetetics themselves, were certainly still meeting towards the end of the 1820s and corresponded with the *Lion*, Carlile's successor to the *Republican*.¹¹⁸ Edinburgh provided further national *causes célèbres* with a spate of prosecutions of infidel booksellers during the Disruption in 1843. The local booksellers, whose arrests were fastened onto by the Anti-Persecution Union's missionaries, were Thomas Finlay, a former cabinet-maker and one of the original members of the Edinburgh zetetics, and his son-in-law Henry Robinson. Along with the trial of Thomas Paterson, their crimes were aggravated by the active advertisement of the books indicted and by titles striking at the religious education of youth, including 'Cosmopolite's' *The Bible an Improper Book for Youth*.¹¹⁹ The themes of Affleck's trial were replayed during another period of politico-religious turmoil nearly twenty years later.

The argument pursued above is that to understand the aims, culture and activities of early nineteenth-century infidels, these need to be analysed at both the national and the local level. Asa Briggs' powerful case for examining the local sinews of national political movements helped to inspire huge volumes of local case studies for most nineteenth-century political movements.¹²⁰ In doing the same for necessarily evasive and slippery groups of infidels and atheists we can test some of the analysis forwarded at a national level or on the basis of London's radical culture.

In doing so for an especially well documented group three things become clear. First, the importance of local context in explaining the form and content of infidel activities. Scotland's legal, cultural and religious capital afforded particular resources as well as particular challenges and hazards, which themselves shaped the zetetic society. Second, the diversity of infidel thought and culture. Zetetics may have taken Carlile as their model and their guide, but local groups both shaped 'Carlile's' movement and drew from many other sources as well. Third, in being able to catch glimpses into the life stories of individual infidels, we can interrogate the public personae they presented in the pages of the *Republican*. The experiences of James Affleck, for example, certainly do not fit the template for a heroic martyr of infidel mythology, but nor do they reveal the proud, sensuous, inconstant and impious seducer of youth that the enemies of the zetetics demonised.

¹ 'To Mr R. Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 18 Jan. 1822, 79. Part of this letter is reproduced in *The Infidel Tradition: From Paine to Bradlaugh*, ed. E. Royle (London, 1976), pp. 31-2.

² G. J. Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Richard Carlile* (London, 1849); T. Carlile Campbell, *The Battle of the Press: As told in the Story of the Life of Richard Carlile* (London, 1899).

³ G. D. H. Cole, *Richard Carlile: 1750-1843* (London, 1943); G. A. Aldred, *Richard Carlile, his Battle for the Free Press: How Defiance Defeated Government Terrorism* (London, 1912); *idem*, *Richard Carlile, Agitator, his Life and Times* (Glasgow, 1941); W. H. Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press: 1819-1832* (London, 1928).

⁴ The best modern biography of Carlile, which incorporates these insights, is J. H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Life of Richard Carlile* (Westport CT and London, 1983).

⁵ I. D. McCalman, 'Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth-century England' (unpublished masters thesis, Australian National University, 1970).

⁶ M. L. Bush, *The Friends and Following of Richard Carlile: A Study of Infidel Republicanism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Diss, 2016).

⁷ E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791-1866* (Manchester, 1974).

⁸ Bush, *Friends and Following*, pp. 273-9.

⁹ J. A. Epstein, 'Reason's Republic: Richard Carlile, Zetetic Culture, and Infidel Stylistics', in his *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 100-46, 200-16; G. A. Williams, 'Conference Reports: The Infidel Working Class 1790-1830', *Bulletin of Labour History*, 29 (1974), 8.

¹⁰ *London Investigator*, 6 (Sept. 1854).

¹¹ D. Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain: 1789 to the Present* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 8.

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- ¹² M. C. W. Hunter, “‘Aikenhead the Atheist’: The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century’, in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. M.C.W. Hunter and D. Wootton (Oxford, 1992), pp. 221-54; M. Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2008).
- ¹³ Nash, *Blasphemy*, p. 13.
- ¹⁴ I. McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge, 1988).
- ¹⁵ These precognitions are held at National Records of Scotland [hereafter NRS], AD14/22/253 and AD14/24/40.
- ¹⁶ Good introductions to the religious and publishing context can be found in S. J. Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland 1801-46* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 22-31, 41-4; W. McDougall, ‘Edinburgh’, in *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland: Volume 2 Enlightenment and Expansion 1707-1800*, ed. Stephen W. Brown and Warren McDougall (Edinburgh, 2012), pp. 118-31.
- ¹⁷ Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, pp. 83-5.
- ¹⁸ I. Maciver, ‘The General Assembly of the Church, the State, and Society in Scotland’ (unpublished MLitt thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1977); G. Pentland, *Radicalism, Reform and National Identity in Scotland, 1820-1833* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 41-8.
- ¹⁹ J. McKerrow, *History of the Secession Church* (rev. edn, Glasgow, 1841).
- ²⁰ C. G. Brown, ‘Religion and Social Change’, in *People and Society in Scotland: Volume I, 1760-1830*, ed. T. M. Devine and R. Mitchison (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 143-62, 157-9.
- ²¹ Brown, *National Churches*, p. 61.
- ²² S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 51-60. The two best known were W. Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (London, 1794) and R. Watson, *Apology for the Bible* (London, 1796), the latter an explicit refutation of the positions adopted in Paine’s *Age of Reason*. ‘To Mr William Henry Steuart, Dundee’, *Republican*, 2 May 1823, 563.
- ²³ Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, pp. 107-9.

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- ²⁴ T. Chalmers, *A Series of Discourses on the Christian Revelation Viewed in Connection with the Modern Astronomy* (6th edn., Edinburgh, 1817), p. 6; P. Ray Murray, 'Religion', in *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland: Volume 3 Ambition and Industry 1800-80*, ed. B. Bell (Edinburgh, 2007), p. 292.
- ²⁵ M. Philp, 'Disconcerting Ideas: Explaining Popular Radicalism and Popular Loyalism in the 1790s', in *English Radicalism, 1550-1850*, ed. G. Burgess (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 157-89.
- ²⁶ 'On the Character of the Infidel', *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, 22:7 (July 1823), 460-4.
- ²⁷ T. M. Devine, 'Urbanisation', in *People and Society*, ed. Devine and Mitchison pp. 40-1.
- ²⁸ M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787-1886* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 28.
- ²⁹ R. Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh* (new edn, Edinburgh, 1846), p. 9.
- ³⁰ The process would continue with the building of George IV Bridge at the end of the 1820s; D. A. Symonds, *Notorious Murders, Black Lanterns, and Moveable Goods: The Transformation of Edinburgh's Underworld in the early nineteenth century* (Akron OH, 2006).
- ³¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser. viii. 1015; NRS, AD14/22/253, Declaration of John Kesson, 18 Nov. 1822.
- ³² Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, ch. 3; NRS, AD14/24/40, Declaration of James Affleck, 23 Feb. 1824.
- ³³ McCalman, 'Radicalism and Freethought', pp. 81-5.
- ³⁴ M. Chase, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester, 2013).
- ³⁵ G. Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union: Popular Politics in Scotland, 1815-1820* (London, 2011), chs 4-5.
- ³⁶ The framework is, of course, provided in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), ch. 16. See also McCalman, 'Radicalism and Freethought', pp. 135-8; J. Belchem, 'Republicanism, popular constitutionalism and the radical platform in early nineteenth-century England', *Social History*, 6:1 (1981), 1-32.
- ³⁷ Fair Play, *Marvellous and disinterested patriotism of certain learned Whigs* (Edinburgh, 1820), p. 15; [G. Croly], 'Domestic Politics', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 8 (Dec. 1820), 337.

³⁸ Devon Record Office, Addington Papers, 152M/C1820/OH49, Alexander Boswell to Lord Sidmouth, 4 Feb. 1820.

³⁹ 'Edinburgh', *Republican*, 22 Feb. 1822, 235; *The Post-office Annual Directory, from Whitsunday 1820 to Whitsunday 1821* (Edinburgh, 1820).

⁴⁰ McCalman, 'Radicalism and Freethought', pp. 111-12.

⁴¹ Based on subscription lists in the *Republican*, for 22 Feb., 5 Apr., 5 July, 22 Nov. 1822 and 23 Jan. 1824 and volumes of the *Edinburgh Post-office Annual Directory* for 1822, 1823 and 1824.

⁴² *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser. viii. 1018.

⁴³ 'On Providence: A Discourse delivered before the Edinburgh Zetetic Society', *Republican*, 7 Feb. 1822, 164-74.

⁴⁴ I. McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History*, 38 (1980), 1-25; A. Keane, 'Richard Carlile's Working Women: Selling Books, Politics, Sex and the Republican', *History and Literature*, 15:2 (2006), 20-33. See for example lists 'To Mr Richard Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 23 Jan. 1824, 122; 'To Mr Richard Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 11 Mar. 1825, 307. James Affleck reported in September 1822 that 'we have very few meetings that are not honoured by the company of females', 'To Mr Richard Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 13 Sept. 1822, 490.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Robert Affleck on education and family life in 'To Mr Carlile', *Lion*, 29 Aug. 1828, 281-4.

⁴⁶ NRS, AD14/22/253, Declaration of John Kesson, 18 Nov. 1822.

⁴⁷ *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser. viii. 1014.

⁴⁸ 'A Discourse, Delivered before the Edinburgh Zetetic Society, on the Absurdity of Public Worship', *Republican*, 31 Jan. 1823, 136-44.

⁴⁹ NRS, AD14/22/253, Declaration of John Milne, 19 Nov. 1822.

⁵⁰ R. Balmain, *Reminiscences of Clyde Street Hall and my Early Days* (Edinburgh, 1893); *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser. viii. 1014-15.

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- ⁵¹ NRS, AD14/22/253, Declaration of James Thorburn, 18 Nov. 1822.
- ⁵² McCalman, 'Popular Radicalism and Freethought', ch. 5; E. Royle, 'Freethought: The Religion of Irreligion', in *Nineteenth-century English Religious Traditions: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Denis G. Paz (Westport CT and London, 1995), pp. 171-96.
- ⁵³ 'On the Absurdity of Public Worship', *Republican*, 31 Jan. 1823, 144.
- ⁵⁴ McCalman, 'Popular Radicalism and Freethought', ch. 4; Epstein, 'Reason's Republic', pp. 109-36.
- ⁵⁵ Epstein, 'Reason's Republic', p. 114.
- ⁵⁶ NRS, AD14/12/253, Declarations of George McLatchie and John Moses, 19 Nov. 1822.
- ⁵⁷ See, for example, 'To Mr Richard Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 23 Jan. 1824, 122.
- ⁵⁸ NRS, AD14/12/253, Declaration of James Thorburn, 18 Nov. 1822 and Daniel Gow, 19 Nov. 1822.
- ⁵⁹ The discussion below is based on the following: *Scotsman*, 23 Nov. 1822; NRS, Ad14/22/253, Declarations of John Kesson and George McLatchie, 18 Nov. 1822 and James Thorburn, Thomas Birnie, George Dichmont, 19 Nov. 1822; *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser. viii. 1016.
- ⁶⁰ McCalman, 'Popular Radicalism and Freethought', pp. 139-48.
- ⁶¹ 'Cain', *Republican*, 15 Mar. 1822, 341-3.
- ⁶² R. Carlile, *An Address to Men of Science, Calling upon them to Stand Forward and Vindicate the Truth from the Foul Grasp and Persecution of Superstition* (London, 1821); Epstein, 'Reason's Republic', pp. 123-31.
- ⁶³ In 1824 Carlile also published an edition of Toulmin's *Antiquity and Duration of the World*, see R. Porter, 'George Hoggart Toulmin's Theory of Man and the Earth in the Light of the Development of British Geology', *Annals of Science*, 35:4 (1978), 351-2.
- ⁶⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser. viii. 1017.
- ⁶⁵ 'To the Republicans of the Island of Great Britain', *Republican*, 6 Dec. 1822, 867.
- ⁶⁶ Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain*, p. 11.
- ⁶⁷ McCalman, 'Popular Radicalism and Freethought', pp. 148-52; Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, p. 50.

⁶⁸ NRS, AD14/24/40, Declaration of Thomas Webster, 23 Feb. 1824. The legal authorities were clearly interested in determining whether Combe had authored any of the zetetics' publications and were possibly seeking an opportunity to prosecute this Owenite propagandist. For Combe see J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World* (London, 1969), pp. 85-6, 103-5; G. Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 124-33.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Carlile's positive comments on Combe's publications in 'Books and Pamphlets Published', *Republican*, 13 June 1823, 767; A. Combe, *An Address to the Conductors of the Periodical Press, upon the Causes of Religious and Political Disputes, with Remarks on the Local and General Definition of Certain Words and Terms which have been often the Subject of Controversy* (Edinburgh, 1823)

⁷⁰ NRS, AD14/22/253, Declaration of James Thorburn, 19 Nov. 1822.

⁷¹ The library also contained a much-reprinted defence of theological orthodoxy by the Irish non-juror Charles Leslie, *Short Method with the Deists* (1694), which was frequently appended to Ogden's work.

⁷² Epstein, 'Reason's Republic', pp. 113-14, 121.

⁷³ 'To Mr R. Carlile, Dorchester Gaol' and 'To Mr. James Affleck, Edinburgh', *Republican*, 13 Jan. 1822, 79-85. The rules laid out in Affleck's letters were adopted, for example, by the London Zetetic Society, 'Rules and Regulations of the London Zetetic Society', *Republican*, 3 Mar. 1822, 570-1.

⁷⁴ See, for example, entries in W. Smellie, *Encyclopedia Britannica: or, a Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (3 vols, Edinburgh, 1768-1771), iii. 953; S. Jones, *A General Pronouncing and Explanatory Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1797).

⁷⁵ 'To Mr. R. Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 1 Nov. 1822, 707.

⁷⁶ The five lectures, which appeared in parts, were: 'On the Absurdity of Public Worship', 'On Providence', 'On the Immortality of the Soul', 'On the Power and Goodness of the Christian Deity', and 'On the Personality of the Deity'.

⁷⁷ [R. Affleck], *Critical Remarks on the Truth and Harmony of the Four Gospels* (London, 1823); 'Books and Pamphlets Published', *Republican*, 13 June 1823, 764-6.

⁷⁸ See, for examples, the contributions of William Skinner (an acrostic), Adam Crawford (a song) and Thomas Finlay (a letter and a parody of 'Hearts of Oak') in 'An Acrostic on Richard Carlile', *Republican*, 18 Jan. 1822, 85, 'Song composed by Adam Crawford, for the Occasion of Celebrating the Anniversary of the Birth of Thomas Paine', *Republican*, 22 Feb. 1822, 235 and 'To Mr. R. Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', 20 Dec. 1822, 952-4.

⁷⁹ J. A. Epstein and D. Karr, 'Playing at Revolution: British "Jacobin" Performance', *Journal of Modern History*, 79:3 (2007), 497.

⁸⁰ 'On the Birth-days of Thomas Paine, the Real Englishman; and the Factitious Jesus, the Jew', *Republican*, 4 Jan. 1822, 7-10.

⁸¹ J. Epstein, 'Rituals of Solidarity: Radical Dining, Toasting, and Symbolic Expression', in his *Radical Expression*, pp. 147-65, 216-23.

⁸² 'Edinburgh', *Republican*, 22 Feb. 1822, 234-5.

⁸³ T. E. Orme, 'Toasting Fox: The Fox Dinners in Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1801-1825', *History*, 99:337 (2014), 588-606.

⁸⁴ A. Nicolson, *Memoirs of Adam Black* (Edinburgh, 1885), p. 67.

⁸⁵ *Caledonian Mercury*, 12 and 13 Jan. 1821;

⁸⁶ Epstein, 'Reason's Republic', pp. 122-3.

⁸⁷ 'To Mr R. Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 28 Feb. 1823, 271-3; P. Dennant, 'The "barbarous old English jig": The "Black Joke" in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Folk Music Journal*, 10:3 (2013), 298-318.

⁸⁸ For a concise account of the visit, see S. Parissien, *George IV: The grand entertainment* (London, 2001), ch. 16.

⁸⁹ 'To Mr R. Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 4 Oct. 1822, 600-7; *Poems and Songs: Humorous, Serious, and Satirical*, ed. R. Ford (2nd edn, Paisley, 1901), pp. 205-7.

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- ⁹⁰ National Archives, Home Office Correspondence (Scotland), HO102/34, Return of the number of indictments raised at the instance of his majesty's advocate, 9 Feb. 1821; *House of Commons Papers*, Return of Number of Individuals prosecuted for Public Libel, Blasphemy and Sedition in England, Wales and Scotland, 1808-20, 1821, xxi. 379. The cases were of Matthew Shiels in 1819, Alexander Marshall, Walter Baillie and their wives in 1820.
- ⁹¹ NRS, AD14/22/253, Precognition of James Thorburn, 18 Nov. 1822.
- ⁹² NRS, AD14/22/253, Declaration of Thomas Birnie, 19 Nov. 1822.
- ⁹³ Epstein, 'Reason's Republic', p. 131.
- ⁹⁴ NRS, AD14/22/253, Declarations of Thomas Birnie, Alexander Grant, George Dichmont, George Bruce and James Mitchell, 19 Nov. 1822.
- ⁹⁵ NRS, JC26/1824/181, William Rae to James Affleck, 12 Mar. 1824.
- ⁹⁶ P. Harling, 'The Law of Libel and the Limits of Repression, 1790-1832', *Historical Journal*, 44:1 (2001), 107-34.
- ⁹⁷ *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 Nov. 1822; *Glasgow Herald*, 22 Nov. 1822; *Scotsman*, 23 Nov. 1822.
- ⁹⁸ NRS, JC26/1824/181, Copy petition to the Right Hon. the Lord Advocate by James Affleck, 8 Mar. 1824.
- ⁹⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd series, viii. 1014-19.
- ¹⁰⁰ 'Celebration of Mr Paine's Birth-day at Leeds', *Republican*, 7 Mar. 1823, 314.
- ¹⁰¹ *Scotsman*, 23 Apr. 1823.
- ¹⁰² P. Pickering, 'Chartism and the 'Trade of Agitation' in Early Victorian Britain', *History*, 76:247 (1991), 222-4.
- ¹⁰³ 'To Mr Richard Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 23 Jan. 1824, 121.
- ¹⁰⁴ NRS, AD14/24/40, Declarations of James Affleck, 20 and 23 Feb. 1824.
- ¹⁰⁵ NRS, AD14/24/40, Declaration of James Affleck, 23 Feb. 1824; NRS, JC26/1824/181, List of books, pamphlets and placards found in the shop of James Affleck, 21 Feb. 1824.

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- ¹⁰⁶ Anon., *A Preliminary Address, from the President of the Edinburgh Free-thinkers Zetetic Society to the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, intended as the basis of an overture for union* (Edinburgh, 1823); Anon., *Letter Second, from the President of the Edinburgh Free-thinkers' Society, to the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, upon the subject of Union* (Edinburgh, 1824); *Scotsman*, 22 Nov. 1823.
- ¹⁰⁷ A. Thomson, *Sermons on Infidelity* (Edinburgh, 1821), pp. 315-26; 'On the Character of the Infidel', *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, 22:7 (July 1823), 460-4.
- ¹⁰⁸ Anon., *The Zetetic Society's shorter catechism, for explaining to the young and the ignorant, the principles of atheism* (Edinburgh, 1823).
- ¹⁰⁹ NRS, AD14/24/40, Declaration of James Affleck, 20 Feb. 1824.
- ¹¹⁰ P. Ray Murray, 'Education', *History of the Book in Scotland*, ed. Bell, pp. 324-5.
- ¹¹¹ See, for example, British Library, Peel Papers, Add MS40380, f. 195, Richard Carlile to Robert Peel, 22 July 1825.
- ¹¹² NRS, JC26/1824/181, 'Petition to the Right Honourable the Lord Advocate by James Affleck', 8 March 1824.
- ¹¹³ NRS, JC26/1824/181, James Affleck to William Rae, 24 March 1824; 'Trial of James Affleck, for Blasphemous Publications', *Edinburgh Annual Register* (19 vols, Edinburgh, 1810-28), xvii. 127-9.
- ¹¹⁴ NRS, JC26/1824/181, 'Inventory of productions with defences for James Affleck', n.d.
- ¹¹⁵ NRS, JC26/1824/181, 'Inventory of productions with defences' contains references to the catalogues of two Edinburgh booksellers, John Carfrae and Richard Ireland.
- ¹¹⁶ 'Prosecutions for Moral Blasphemy in Scotland', *Republican*, 17 and 24 Sept. and 1 Oct. 1824, 321-52, 372-84, 411-16; 'Trial of James Affleck', *Edinburgh Annual Register*, xvii. 127-8.
- ¹¹⁷ 'Prosecutions', *Republican*, 17 Sept. 1824, pp. 321-2; 'To Richard Carlile, Dorchester Gaol', *Republican*, 8 Oct. 1824, 439-41.
- ¹¹⁸ 'To the Reverend Robert Taylor', *Lion*, 27 June 1828, pp. 823-4; 'To Mr Carlile', *Lion*, 29 Aug. 1828, 281-4.

¹¹⁹ Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, pp. 83-5; NRS, JC26/1843/515, Trial papers relating to Thomas Finlay for the crime of publishing or vending profane, impious or blasphemous books; Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, pp. 95-6.

¹²⁰ Asa Briggs, 'The background of the Parliamentary Reform Movement in three English Cities, 1830-32', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 10:3 (1952), 293-317.